

# **Executive Summary of the State of Charter School Compensation in Colorado**

*A Data-Driven Analysis of Salary, Benefits, and Total Compensation Across Roles and  
Regions*

Developed in Partnership with Denver Families for Public Schools and the Colorado  
League of Charter Schools

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## 1. Executive Overview

Colorado's charter sector is entering a critical moment for compensation reform. With statewide shortages in teacher recruitment and retention, rising cost-of-living pressures, and widening disparities between urban and rural labor markets, compensation functions as an important consideration for staff members seeking new employment. This 10-page executive narrative distills the most critical findings from the comprehensive Colorado Charter Compensation Study with a focus on the implications for boards, executive directors, and strategic leadership teams responsible for long-term organizational stewardship.

Across the state, charter schools face economic challenges due to enrollment shifts, facility costs, and operational costs as smaller scale operations than their district counterparts. These factors compress budgets and constrain salary competitiveness, particularly for schools serving historically resilient communities and rural regions where recruitment challenges are most acute. At the same time, Colorado's urban charter sector, including the Denver Public Schools (DPS) portfolio, has moved aggressively toward transparent, predictable compensation systems aligned with district benchmarks. These structural differences have produced a widening compensation disparity across regions, with direct implications for educator recruitment, instructional continuity, and school performance.

This executive summary synthesizes statewide trends, regional salary patterns, benefits participation, and distinct DPS-charter practices. It includes an analysis of implications for equity, organizational health, and talent stability, followed by a set of high-leverage actions that charter boards should consider within annual budgeting, strategic planning, and executive evaluation processes.

The central finding is clear: **Compensation is no longer a compliance function. It is a strategic driver of educator quality, educational equity, and long-term organizational sustainability.**

Boards and school leadership must treat compensation as a key lever in improving retention, recruitment, and staff well-being, anchoring pay structures to mission, values, and market reality.

## 2. The Colorado Charter Compensation Landscape

### 2.1 Structural Realities and Funding Inequities

Colorado charter schools operate with significant fiscal constraints relative to district counterparts. Charter schools experience substantial variability based on authorizer, district

policies, and access to outside funding. Facilities financing further exacerbates inequality: charter schools without district-provided buildings may spend up to \$835 per pupil on facilities costs, diverting funds away from salaries and benefits.

These structural inequities undermine compensation competitiveness, especially for schools serving Title I populations and English Language Learners. While many charters have leveraged flexibility to innovate in staffing, calendar design, and professional development, systemic funding constraints limit their ability to offer salaries aligned with regional labor market expectations.

## 2.2 Teacher Salary Trends and Market Competition

The study demonstrates that Colorado charter teachers earn meaningfully less on average than district teachers. As of recent statewide data, the average salary for charter teachers is approximately \$56,300 compared to significantly higher district averages, such as the \$99,700 average in Boulder Valley School District and the state average of \$68,600. This disparity impacts recruitment, particularly in high-cost regions.

The survey identified clear regional patterns:

- **Denver charters** lead the state, with starting salaries around \$58,500 and maximum salaries around \$74,000.
- **Front Range charters** offer competitive salaries but remain slightly below Denver benchmarks.
- **Mountain and rural regions** report the lowest base salaries and struggle to maintain parity due to smaller enrollments, limited budgets, and high housing costs.

At all experience levels, there is a \$9,000–\$12,000 gap between Denver and the Western Slope or rural regions, contributing to chronic staffing shortages in remote communities.

## 2.3 Total Compensation: Benefits and Incentives

While nearly all charter schools offer health coverage, the depth and generosity of benefits vary considerably. The study found:

- 89% offer paid employee health insurance, but dependent coverage is inconsistent.
- Only 67% offer dental and vision coverage.
- Paid parental leave is offered by only 42% of charters statewide but 78% of DPS charters.

- Professional development stipends are prevalent in networked and urban schools, less so in rural regions.

As a result, total compensation varies even more widely than base salary, creating inequities within roles and across regions.

### **3. Regional Salary and Benefits Patterns**

#### **3.1 Denver (DPS-Authorized Charters)**

Denver charters represent the most competitive compensation market in the state, driven by access to district resources, higher staffing budgets, and competitive labor pressures. Average teacher salaries range from \$60,000–\$72,000, and most schools publish formal salary schedules mirroring DPS benchmarks.

DPS-authorized charters report:

- ~100% health insurance coverage
- 93% dental/vision coverage
- 95% retirement participation through PERA
- More comprehensive paid leave benefits
- Standardized degree and certification differentials
- Strong wellness, mental health, and professional development supports

These schools serve as a model for transparent, equitable compensation systems that drive retention and organizational culture.

#### **3.2 Front Range Charters (Non-DPS)**

Front Range charters (e.g., Boulder, Jeffco, Colorado Springs, Douglas County) maintain competitive salaries, typically 5–10% below DPS ranges. Benefits quality, however, varies significantly.

Front Range strengths include mature HR systems that provide clarity and stability for staff, clear compensation schedules that support transparency and equity, and strong investments in professional development that help employees build the skills they need to grow. At the same time, the region faces several challenges, including inconsistent wellness benefits across roles and campuses, limited parental leave offerings that do not fully meet the needs of the

workforce, and higher turnover in high-cost communities where the absence of housing stipends makes long-term retention more difficult.

### **3.3 Mountain Region**

Mountain schools report some of the lowest compensation yet face the highest cost of living, creating significant pressure on both staff and school operations. In response, some schools rely on creative approaches such as housing stipends, shortened work years, multi-role staffing patterns, and flexible work calendars to make positions more sustainable. Despite these innovations, teacher recruitment and retention remain acute challenges, largely due to persistent housing shortages and limited regional funding capacity.

### **3.4 Western Slope and Rural Regions**

Rural charter schools report the lowest base salary ranges across all roles, yet they often experience the highest stability among long-tenured staff. Their small risk pools limit the benefits they can offer, pushing many schools to rely on flexible scheduling and community-based retention strategies rather than financial incentives. While these schools consistently prioritize strong relationships and community cohesion, the growing compensation disparity between rural and urban regions creates a widening inequity that threatens long-term recruitment and retention.

## **4. The DPS Charter Market: A Statewide Benchmark**

### **4.1 Overview**

The DPS charter sector comprises more than 50 schools and serves nearly 15,000 students. DPS charters were overrepresented in the study sample, providing rich comparative data across networks and single-site schools.

### **4.2 Salary Competitiveness**

DPS charters consistently outperform statewide charter medians:

- Median starting salary: ~ \$58,500–\$60,000
- Median mid-career salary: ~ \$65,800
- Median maximum salary: ~ \$74,000

The most competitive networks, KIPP Colorado, DSST, and RMP, offer rapid progression, performance stipends, and differentiated pay for high-needs roles but are also the largest charter networks. .

#### **4.3 Total Rewards Strategies**

DPS charter schools distinguish themselves through a comprehensive and competitive approach to employee benefits that strengthens belonging, stability, and retention. In the area of health and wellness, some schools offer 100 percent employer-paid health, dental, and vision coverage, provide wellness stipends, include mental health sessions, and incorporate PTO buy-outs or flexible leave structures. Professional development systems further differentiate these schools, offering clear leadership pathways, paid coaching cycles, annual PD stipends, and release time for training. Together, these investments create an environment where staff feel supported, valued, and equipped to grow across their careers.

#### **4.4 Pay Transparency and Equity**

Most DPS charter schools publish clear salary scales and openly communicate their compensation philosophy, ensuring staff understand how pay decisions are made. Schools commonly use step-based raises, degree and certification differentials, predictable progression systems, and market-based benchmarking to maintain fairness and competitiveness. This level of transparency reduces perceptions of inequity and strengthens trust between leadership and staff, contributing to a more stable and collaborative school culture.

### **5. Implications for Talent, Equity, and Organizational Sustainability**

#### **5.1 Compensation as an Equity Strategy**

The study reinforces a critical finding: compensation structures directly influence student equity and outcomes. Schools with lower pay, especially in high cost regions, may experience higher turnover, reduced instructional consistency, and a greater dependence on novice educators. Research highlighted in the study shows that experienced educators have a measurable and positive impact on student performance, particularly for students from historically resilient communities. In this context, compensation equity becomes more than an operational decision, it becomes an instructional strategy that directly supports stronger, more stable learning environments.

#### **5.2 The Urban–Rural Talent Divide**

Compensation differences across regions are widening rather than narrowing, creating uneven conditions for charter schools across the state. Urban charters benefit from larger labor pools, stronger philanthropic support, more stable enrollment, greater access to mill levy distributions, and larger centralized HR teams that can manage complex systems. In contrast, rural schools operate with lower per-pupil revenue, face harder-to-fill roles, contend with housing costs that far outpace local wages, and must navigate smaller benefits pools that drive up the cost of offering competitive coverage. These disparities threaten the cohesion and long-term viability of the statewide charter sector, making it increasingly difficult to ensure equitable access to talent and consistent learning experiences for students regardless of geography.

### **5.3 Salary Compression Across Roles**

When teacher salaries rise without corresponding increases for paraprofessionals, special educators, assistant principals, or principals, schools experience salary compression, which reduces incentives for advancement and creates internal pay inequities. The study highlights the importance of monitoring the gap between instructional assistants and first-year teachers, the gap between teachers and assistant principals, and the gap between school leaders and central office leaders. Compression undermines morale, weakens perceptions of fairness, and can destabilize leadership pipelines by discouraging talented staff from pursuing higher levels of responsibility.

### **5.4 Benefits as a Retention Lever**

This study highlights a clear trend: benefits have become just as influential as salary in educators' decisions to stay or leave. Paid parental leave, wellness supports, mental health access, professional development funding, predictable calendars, and transparent retirement options are among the most impactful offerings. These benefits do more than meet basic needs; they reflect an organization's values and contribute meaningfully to culture, belonging, and long-term retention.

### **5.5 Importance of Transparency**

Across all regions, transparency in salary schedules strongly correlates with higher retention, stronger staff trust, clearer advancement pathways, reduced perceptions of favoritism, and better alignment between teacher expectations and school budgeting. Given these outcomes, boards should consider adopting compensation transparency as a governance standard that supports both organizational health and long-term sustainability.

## **6. High-Leverage Recommendations for Boards and Executive Directors**

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations represent the most impactful board-level actions for strengthening compensation systems, improving recruitment and retention, and advancing organizational stability.

### **6.1 Adopt and Publish Transparent Salary Schedules**

Every school should seriously consider having a published salary schedule that clearly outlines steps or grades, degree and certification differentials, hard-to-staff incentives, prior experience credit, leadership differential structures, and clear maximum earnings. Boards should review and approve this schedule annually, ensuring that projected financial impacts are fully evaluated and aligned with long-term sustainability.

### **6.2 Benchmark Salaries Annually to Regional Markets**

Schools should benchmark salaries against local districts, including DPS for metro schools, regionally comparable charter schools, and high-needs role differentials such as special education, STEM, and bilingual positions. Boards should require annual benchmarking as a core component of the budget approval process to ensure competitiveness and equity.

### **6.3 Prioritize Total Rewards, Not Just Salary**

Because many charter schools cannot match district salary scales dollar-for-dollar, total rewards become an essential competitive differentiator. Boards should expand or maintain professional development stipends, mental health supports, parental leave, wellness stipends, housing assistance in high-cost regions, and flexible calendars. These investments strengthen retention, enhance staff well-being, and create a more compelling overall employment experience. Boards can also support their staff members by considering community partnerships (such as discounts at local businesses) that demonstrate authentic care and collaboration within the school community.

### **6.4 Address Role Compression Proactively**

Boards should consider including a structured annual compression analysis in their board calendar that evaluates pay equity across all roles and identifies where salary gaps may weaken advancement pathways. This review should include a clear and consistent series of steps:

First, board members (or an assigned committee) should calculate the wage gap between paraprofessionals and first-year teachers to ensure that instructional support roles remain competitive and aligned with living-wage standards. Second, the team should analyze compensation gaps between teachers and assistant principals, and between assistant principals and principals, to confirm that each step in the leadership pipeline offers meaningful financial progression. Third, the board should review internal equity across specialized roles such as special education, STEM, bilingual staff, and operations to ensure that compensation aligns with certification requirements, job complexity, and market demand.

Fourth, the team should incorporate exit survey data that explicitly captures departing staff perceptions of compensation, benefits, salary competitiveness, and total rewards. This data should be reviewed alongside quantitative analyses to identify themes related to pay dissatisfaction, benefits gaps, or compression effects that may be contributing to turnover.

Finally, the full board should receive a summary report that includes findings, recommended adjustments, and projected fiscal impacts. Based on the full review, schools should adopt compression-proof salary progression for leadership roles to protect incentives for advancement and support long-term organizational stability.

In addition, boards should adopt a three- to five-year compensation strategy that establishes clear priorities and long-term planning. This strategy should include target salary benchmarks, planned increases tied to realistic revenue projections, prioritized benefits expansions, and long-term facilities financing solutions that ease operational pressure. This allows for staff to anticipate salary increases for long-term life planning.

## **6.5 Strengthen Rural and Mountain Region Supports**

Boards in rural regions should consider a set of targeted strategies designed to address persistent recruitment and retention challenges. These may include housing stipends or partnerships with local landlords, compressed or alternative calendars that ease staffing pressures and allow for teachers in these areas to take advantage of the benefits of these regions (such as ski season, etc.), teacher residency programs that grow local talent, relocation support for incoming staff, and shared services such as pooled benefits, HR systems, or professional development opportunities. Given the widening compensation and cost-of-living gap between urban and rural communities, statewide collaboration will be essential to strengthening rural school sustainability and ensuring equitable access to high-quality educators.

## 7. Conclusion

The evidence is clear: compensation systems, salary, benefits, and transparency, are central to charter school stability, teacher retention, and equitable student outcomes. In a competitive labor market, boards and executive directors must treat compensation as a strategic investment rather than an operational expense. Transparent structures, regional benchmarking, total rewards expansion, and equity-driven decision-making are the most effective levers for attracting and retaining a strong, diverse educator workforce.

Through intentional design and board-level stewardship, charter schools can build compensation systems that honor the profession, reduce turnover, and strengthen student learning across Colorado's diverse communities.

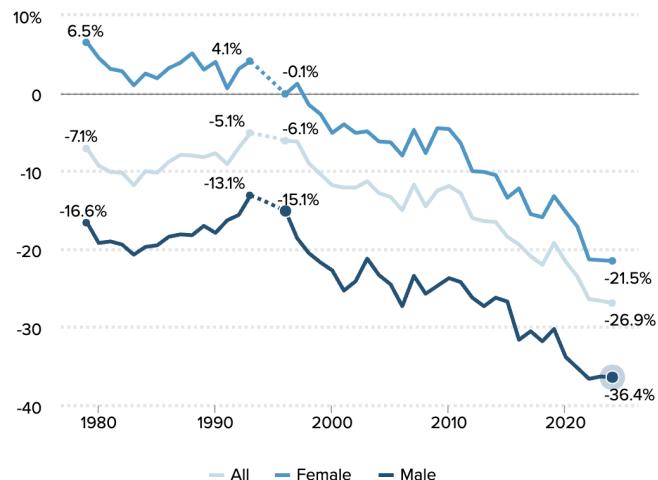
## 8. Key Data

### 8.1 School Representation in Charter Compensation Survey

Region	Number of Schools	% of Total Sample	Representative Counties
Denver (DPS-authorized) <i>DPS' direct service area</i>	32	43.8%	Denver County
Front Range (non-Denver) <i>Urban–suburban corridor along I-25 and its commuter belt, where most of the population resides</i>	18	24.7%	Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Douglas, Elbert, El Paso, Jefferson, Larimer, Pueblo, Weld
Mountain Region <i>High-altitude resort and tourism-driven counties, often facing teacher-housing challenges</i>	10	13.7%	Chaffee, Clear Creek, Eagle, Garfield, Gilpin, Grand, Gunnison, Lake, Park, Pitkin, Routt, Summit, Teller
Western Slope / Rural <i>Western, southwestern, and far-eastern plains counties with dispersed populations and limited housing or salary parity</i>	13	17.8%	Alamosa, Archuleta, Baca, Bent, Conejos, Costilla, Crowley, Custer, Delta, Dolores, Fremont, Hinsdale, Huerfano, Kiowa, Kit Carson, La Plata, Las Animas, Lincoln, Mesa, Mineral, Moffat, Montezuma, Montrose, Morgan, Otero, Ouray, Phillips, Prowers, Rio Blanco, Rio Grande, Saguache, San Juan, San Miguel, Sedgwick, Washington, Yuma

## 8.2 National Comparison Data

### Weekly Wage Gap Between Teachers and College Graduates in Other Careers



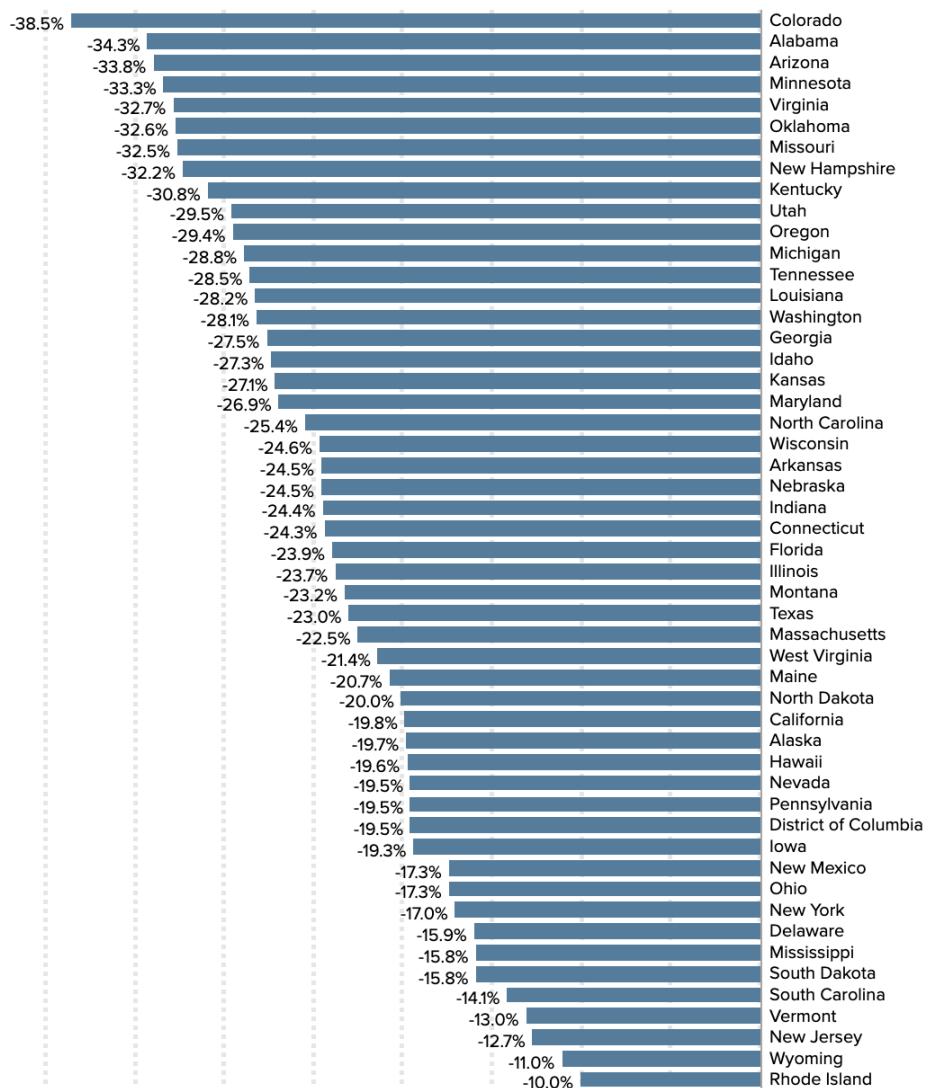
### National average education salaries by position

Position	National Average Salary (USD)
Superintendent	\$120,000 - \$170,000
Principal	\$95,000 - \$130,000
Teacher (Entry-Level)	\$40,000 - \$50,000
Teacher (Average)	\$50,000 - \$65,000
Special Education Teacher	\$45,000 - \$70,000
Paraprofessional/Teaching Asst.	\$25,000 - \$35,000
Support Staff (Counselor/Librarian)	\$50,000 - \$70,000

### Average Colorado Teacher Salaries in District Versus Charters

Region	All Schools Average	Charter Average	Difference (\$)	Difference (%)
DPS	\$76,901	\$52,270	\$-24,631	-32.0%
Front Range	\$78,729	\$63,408	\$-15,322	-19.5%
Mountain	\$68,531	\$58,264	\$-10,267	-15.0%
Western Slope / Rural	\$nan	\$56,337	\$nan	+nan%
Statewide	\$72,781	\$56,949	\$-15,833	-21.8%

Regression-adjusted estimates by state, pooled CPS data for 2019–2024 (EPI, 2025)



### 8.3 Survey Data

Average salary by region

Role	Statewide	DPS Region	Front Range	Mountain	Western Slope
Paraprofessional / Teaching Assistant	\$38,200	\$44,000	\$39,100	\$36,800	\$34,700
Special Education Teacher	\$61,700	\$70,000	\$64,200	\$58,000	\$55,000
Teacher (General Education)	\$56,300	\$65,000	\$58,000	\$53,000	\$51,000
Instructional Coach / Dean	\$69,400	\$75,000	\$70,000	\$65,000	\$62,000
Principal / School Leader	\$105,000	\$114,000	\$108,000	\$96,000	\$92,000
Executive Director / Network Leader	\$142,000	\$155,000	\$146,000	\$132,000	\$120,000

Difference in average pay by position and region

